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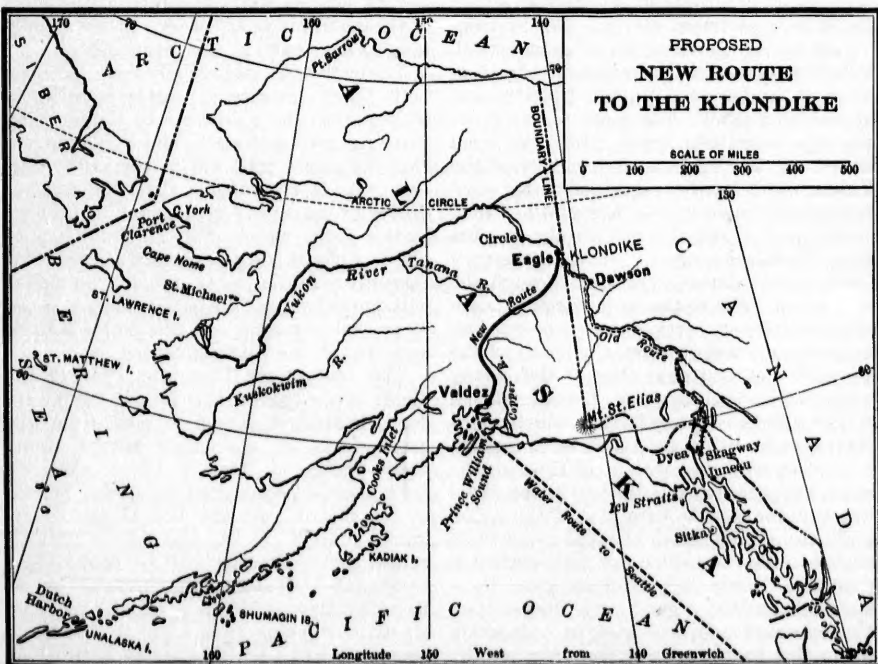
THE ALL-AMERICAN ROUTE TO THE KLONDIKE.

BY EDWARD GILLETTE,
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PROBABLY no portion of our country is making history for itself so fast as the Territory of Alaska. It is not surprising that the interior of this country, away from navigable waters, is virtually unknown. The southern coast, from Icy Straits to Cook Inlet and beyond, presents a most forbidding aspect to the explorer. The cañons

and valleys of the coast range are filled with ice and snow, or with a dense and almost impenetrable growth of vegetation where the soil is exposed.

During the field season of 1899 I was chief engineer of the exploring expedition sent out by the War Department to determine the most practicable route to



the Klondike region all within United States territory.

The result of former years of exploration pointed to Valdez Bay, at the head of Prince William Sound, as the best harbor on the southern coast, and it was desired, if possible, to locate a railroad route of reasonable cost of construction and maintenance from this port to some point on the Yukon River near Fort Egbert or Eagle City. At the head of Valdez Bay is the small town of Valdez, mainly the residue of a large stampede of prospectors to this region a few years ago. At that time the only route into the interior was that which the Indians were known to have used, by way of Valdez Glacier. The hardship, toil, and suffering, to say nothing of the dangers, endured in traversing the forty miles of this glacier, were something appalling. The country east of Valdez was virtually unknown. A few explorers had climbed to the divide, and on looking down into the valley beyond had mistaken the upper valley of Lowe River, the main stream emptying into the head of Valdez Bay, for a lake. The scant maps of this region were very misleading.

However, the recent discovery of a gorge, since named Keystone Cañon, connecting the upper valley with the coast at Valdez, developed a new route to the interior, which the War Department was not slow in opening up by the construction of a pack-trail. This brought about the immediate abandonment of travel over Valdez Glacier, and opened up a practicable route to the great drainage basin of Copper River, the head waters of the Tanana, a tributary of the Yukon, which gave cheaper and better communication between the Forty Mile Creek mining region and the coast. The glaciers along the coast range of Alaska leave very few possible routes across or through the mountains. Where the larger streams, such as Copper River, empty into the ocean, deltas and shoal waters exist, the result of the depositing of vast quantities of the earthy matter which is always to be found in glacial streams, and fills up any harbors which might otherwise furnish a good port for shipping.

The large streams which cut through the coast range have, in addition to the shoal water at the mouth, for a part of the cañon wall overhanging glaciers which make them impracticable as routes for transportation purposes. It was only after the most thorough search that a good route inland from Valdez was found, and this, in connection with a fine harbor open or free from ice the

entire year, furnishes conditions which do not exist elsewhere on the Alaskan coast as far as is known.

The ruling part of the route for a railroad from Valdez to the Yukon River was considered that from the harbor to the divide of the coast range. The interior of the country is undulating, with no great elevation to be overcome, and with much of the line in smooth valleys. The line as located runs from Valdez Bay up to the level valley of Lowe River, for twelve miles with very light work to the mouth of Keystone Cañon, thence with three miles of heavy work through the cañon to the upper valley of the river; thence four miles through this valley to where the climb to the summit begins. The maximum grade for this distance of nineteen miles is one per cent., or fifty-three feet to the mile, and the heavy grade to the summit consists of twelve miles of three per cent., or one hundred and fifty-eight feet per mile. The maximum curvature is ten degrees, and the cost of construction, as a whole, is light for mountain work, being probably thirty thousand dollars per mile. The position of the first part of the line in the valleys away from the slope of the mountains makes it possible to avoid snow-slides, while the climb to the summit is along a succession of benches which so interrupt the slope of the mountain as to render the line equally easy to keep open in this particular.

The pack-trail, including bridges, has been built for a distance of eighty miles from Valdez, the whole distance to Eagle being three hundred and sixty, and it is expected that the entire trail will be completed during 1900. It is probable that this summer droves of cattle will go through to Dawson by this route, which offers an abundance of grass. Already the government has built stations every fifteen miles, which are stocked with provisions, and are permanently manned by two soldiers each, and this policy is to be extended as the route advances.

The route from Thompson Pass, or the divide of the coast range, follows northward down Ptarmigan Creek, named from the great flocks of ptarmigan always found there, thence to Teikhill River, where, in 1898, a large prospectors' camp was burned by forest fires. At the site of this camp, guns, shovels, picks, and other utensils ruined by the fire may still be found. The outfits taken by prospectors into the Copper River country over Valdez Glacier included almost everything from a pin to a sawmill. One party had a boring-machine with which

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to sink a hole to bed-rock, and an electric-light apparatus, so that the lamp could be lowered to the bottom of the hole for the purpose of discovering gold. The line extends over the great grassy plains in the Copper River basin, and crosses many streams, such as the Tonsena, Klutena, Tazlina, and Christochina rivers, thence follows up the Slahna River to Mentasta Pass, thus crossing from the Copper River drainage to that of the Yukon.

In the Copper River valley one can see to the eastward of the river many high mountains, including Wrangel, Tillman, Drum, and Sanford, ranging in height from thirteen to seventeen thousand feet. Mount Wrangel is an active volcano nearly surrounded by immense glaciers. It is thought that the eruptions here last year were the center of the earthquakes which shook violently nearly the whole of Alaska. From Mentasta Pass to the Tanana River the distance is sixty miles, and the grade is light. Once the coast range is passed, the elevations to be overcome are comparatively slight. At the crossing of the Tanana River the stream is six hundred feet wide. This river, the main branch of the Yukon, opens up a great country tributary to this route, virtually unexplored, but known to contain an extensive mineral belt. From the Tanana River the line crosses the divide to Forty Mile Creek, where extensive placer-mining is now being carried on, and thence to the Yukon River close to the boundary-line between Alaska and British Columbia.

Copper and gold deposits are being found in the interior, as well as extensive coal-measures, and future explorations will doubtless demonstrate the fact that the building of this railroad line in the near future will be a paying investment. It means much for the permanent development of Alaska, and the route, being entirely in United States territory, will avoid much of the unpleasantness which arises from using a route partly on foreign soil. The Indians living on the Copper River drainage use native copper for their spear- and arrow-heads. It is interesting to listen to these Indians while at work singing "Marching through Georgia," or "There 'll be a hot time in the old town to-night." They all call themselves McKinley men, probably owing to the fact that the big chief of the white man furnished them with food when their supply of salmon ran short. The rapidity with which these natives adopt the white man's food and manner of dress, as well as some of the energy of our

prospectors, is astonishing when compared with the slow progress made by our reservation Indians.

The agricultural possibilities of this country do not appear great at present, though I have eaten fine potatoes and other vegetables raised at Valdez. Grass grows luxuriantly over most of the country, and berries and small fruits are much more abundant here than in any other part of the United States. It seems at present that mining and the fish and fur interests of Alaska would be the controlling industries in the future, though it would not be surprising to see the agricultural interests able to supply the home market.

Game in this region is somewhat scarce, a few moose, caribou, and mountain-sheep being found; great sport, however, can always be had here in bear-hunting. Dense undergrowth, great quantities of berries, and numerous streams well stocked with salmon and trout, make this region the ideal home of the bear. These animals attain their greatest size in this country, and are found frequently weighing over two thousand pounds. While making the survey we were continually running across them, and their signs were ever present. I remember measuring a fresh track of one of these animals, and found it to be ten inches broad by sixteen inches long. A little later, one of the members of the survey party saw this bear in the act of knocking a salmon out of a stream. The man's statement that a horse would look small by the side of this beast could readily be credited. On Kadiak Island, just off the coast, bears have been killed weighing as much as twenty-two hundred pounds. A dense growth of alder-brush and the usually savage nature of these brutes make conditions extremely hazardous in hunting them. A sure shot, steady nerves, and good judgment are absolutely requisite in the hunter to cope successfully with them.

As a Northern resort for summer tourists, Prince William Sound bids fair to assume great prominence in the future. With good hotel accommodations and a fast line of steamers from some one of our Western ports, a new and wonderful country would be conveniently opened to the public. The sound, being ninety miles long and equally wide, affords ample room for boating.

The result of the season's work was the construction of the government trail to a point eighty miles back from the coast and crossing some of the main western tributaries of the Copper River. Numerous bridges

were constructed on this route, the main ones being over glacial streams. The survey of the railroad line developed a route over a lower summit, on lighter grades, with less curvature, and at a cheaper cost in construction and maintenance than now exists elsewhere in Alaska. Explorations in the interior, at the head of the Tanana and Copper rivers, gave information which renders it necessary to change completely the maps before made of this region.

A comparison of water routes from points on Puget Sound to Skagway and Valdez, Alaska, is somewhat as follows: The route to Skagway is mainly through the inside passage, and practicable for steamers only, while the route to Valdez by the outside passage is perfectly feasible for sailing-craft as well as for steamers. The inside passage is more hazardous for navigation, on account of the narrows, shoal water, and swift-moving tides. As a result of this, insurance rates are much lower on the outside route. In Seymour Narrows, situated off the east shore of Vancouver Island, the velocity of the tides at times exceeds that of the speed of the fastest steamers on the Western coast. It is therefore necessary to wait for a favorable time in the tides to make the passage. In Wrangel Narrows, the extreme crookedness of the narrow channel makes it too dangerous to navigate at night except with the most experienced pilots, and with the

aid of a search-light on the boat to light up the buoys along the channel. In dense fogs, which are frequent along this coast, the usual method of guiding the steamer is to sound the whistle and to listen for the echoes from the neighboring hills. Full speed is generally maintained, as steerage-way could not otherwise be obtained in the swift-running tides. It is a high compliment to the pilots that few accidents occur. The inside passage is beautiful and comfortable, but it does not afford a cheap freight route.

Stampedes, such as the one to the Klondike and the coming one to Cape Nome, pay high rates for the time being; but they are like a flash in the pan, soon over, and the country settles down in its development.

If Alaska is to amount to much in the future in the permanent and regular output from her mines, the route by way of Prince William Sound and across the country to the Yukon River will probably command the larger part of the traffic, and will furnish supplies at the minimum price.

Moreover, the United States will not have to make concessions along her coast-line for the privilege of opening up central Alaska through a foreign country, but can have a better and cheaper route entirely within her own borders, which will aid vastly in the development of the interior. The history of Alaska in the future bids fair to be as startling as it has been in the past.

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